

## **‘Our jolly marin wear’: the queer fashionability of the sailor uniform in inter-war France and Britain.**

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In September 1927 the English painter Edward Burra wrote to his close friend, the photographer Barbara Ker-Seymer in London from Cassis in the South of France about his holiday adventures on the Riviera. As well as time spent sunbathing and watching the hustle and bustle of the Mediterranean crowds, he related stories of drinking in seedy harbour-side bars and cafés and told tales of dancing in lively *bal-musettes* (dance halls). Burra recorded that they had also escaped the sleepy pace of Cassis for the livelier, larger port of Marseilles. The main entertainment in Marseilles consisted of watching the antics of the sailors on leave in the French Navy’s major Mediterranean base and naval dockyard. With a keen eye for the latest fashion trends, Burra updated her about the current styles on display on the Riviera and he conveyed his pleasure at buying sailor wear from the small shops in the Old Town by the port in Marseilles that specialised in selling French *marin* (navy) uniforms and its various accoutrements. Close to the Marseilles portside, in the *Quartier réservé*/ red light area of narrow Medieval streets and dark courtyards with open fronted brothels, Burra was fascinated by the prostitutes who plied their trade to the *matelots* (sailors) writing that ‘the Grand Rue where we get our jolly *marin* wear and linen trousers the guide book says is a veritable ghetto of houses of ill fame my dear I stares into every window hoping for a thrill’ (Chappell 1985: 36-37).

The inexpensive blue and white striped sailors’ vests, bell bottom trousers and red pompom berets, no doubt resonant of the adventurous sailor’s masculine appeal and his infamous sexual antics, were used to spice up what had become the standard day wear of Burra and his friends on the Mediterranean coast. This costume consisted of simple white, or blue and white striped vests, rope-soled espadrilles and white linen trousers, complete with bright hankies, usually red, knotted around their necks worn with dark blue jerseys when required in the cooler evening temperatures. Burra’s friend, the dancer William (Billie) Chappell quickly adopted this updated nautical fashion statement, as Burra related to Ker-Seymer:

The chic wear here is ripping red print hankys round the neck & head white linen trews and bathing shoes in blue, white striped or rose pink... Billy has come out in a lovely toilette of linen trowzers (sic) bathing shoes, a pull over & red kerchief and a jolly beret, bought at Elli’s hat shop in Marseilles, oh you know old men have young ideas when they see Bill (Chappell 1985: 36-37).

In summer 1931, Burra accompanied by his friends the ballet dancers Frederick Ashton and Chappell and this time with Ker-Seymer in tow went to Toulon, that other major French Mediterranean navy port. ‘Everyone was sailor mad’ Ashton recalled and we all wore striped vests bought from the sailor shops (Figure 1):

After dinner, they went to seedy little boîtes frequented by French sailors, using the girls as decoys. One night Ashton danced with a beautiful sailor who made a pass at him, but he was too nervous about taking things further. “I didn’t know whether I’d have to pay him or not” (Kavanagh 1996: 138).

As I will argue, sailor wear with its military uniform exoticism and gender-blurring possibilities registered a much wider queer appeal and non-conformity that stretched far beyond such holidaying circles from Britain. Indeed, throughout the inter-war decades, clothing carried in its meanings for homosexual and bohemian subcultures queer traits that were visible and looked out for. Signs of conspicuous difference, even minor ambiguities, in masculine dress and sartorial detail were recognised as such, even if they were not always definitive in the communication of the sexual preferences of the wearer, but symptomatic of a fashionable bohemianism or artistically inclined temperament rather than a conclusive indicator of sexual perversion or deviance (Doan 2001: 179). Nevertheless, as Quentin Crisp remembered if ‘the sexual meaning of behaviour was only sketchily understood... the symbolism of clothes was understood by everyone’ (Quoted in Houlbrook 2005:148). In this specific case, I propose that the adoption of sailor wear referenced the mythology of the French sailor’s powerful virile attraction, his anti-bourgeois promiscuity and his voracious sexual appetite for one night stands and that there was sufficient currency and understanding of what this might mean, to signal it to those in the know as queerly resonant.

The French sailor’s immoral reputation was well known and extensively documented, not least in police records (Rifkin 1993: 138-39). His reputation for slumming was also evidenced in wild exposés in the popular illustrated press where exaggerated stories about the sailor’s shady dealings whilst on leave in Mediterranean port towns were marshalled in order to highlight the French Navy’s moral decline and to generate public scandal and outrage about *les mauvais gars de la Marine*/ the wide boys of the Navy (Scize 1934: 34). His promiscuous reputation was recycled in many popular cultural forms, notably songs, films, illustrations and popular literature that produced a compelling and dangerous inter-war gay icon. It was one that featured most prominently in contemporary French literature and in the writings of Jean Cocteau, Francis Carco and Pierre MacOrlan, where detailed knowledge about his clothing, speech, locations, manners and comportment was revealed and disseminated to a much wider readership (Rifkin 1993: 155-62). The Mediterranean sailor on leave was also a regular protagonist and staple of pornographic narratives presented and recycled in sexually explicit popular postcards, smutty novels and low-life films of the period.

However, the immoral reputation of French military manhood was differently consumed by inter-war homosexual readerships who adopted his tight fitting uniform and marshalled his style as part of an interpretative framework of ‘dichotomously sexed bodies’ setting the sailor as a manly butch figure in opposition to the outrageous drag ‘quean’ and the effeminate ‘painted boy’ (Houlbrook 2005: 144-45). As Quentin Crisp recalled, in the 1920s ‘the same exaggerated and over-simplified distinction that separated men from women... ran like a wall straight and impassable between...roughs and bitches’ (Houlbrook, 2007: 152).

The inter-war appropriation of French navy wear carried with it on some level, associations derived from these exotic mythologies of the sailor and the racy sailors’ bars (*boîtes à*

*matelots*) with their raunchy seafaring songs, passionate tango dancing and lively accordion music. As the sailor style became increasingly allied to the popularity of Mediterranean travel and the boom in Côte d'Azur tourism gaining pace in 1930s, its connotations of low-life slumming changed and a sense of up-to-date stylishness carried with it for some consumers favourable associations of a relaxed contemporary beach lifestyle modernism and sexual liberalism reducing any explicit taints of maritime rough trade and masculine immorality.

These up-dated understandings of the Mediterranean scene for inter-war gay audiences had, to some degree, been informed by an earlier awareness from the second half of the Nineteenth century of the Mediterranean as a place to encounter attractive Latin men and to consume Hellenistic culture at first hand making it a liberal site of homosexual refuge from the more restrictive penal practices and policing of northern Europe (Aldrich 1993: 4-6). By the 1920s, parts of the Riviera such as Cannes and Monte Carlo were already becoming well known as fashionable resorts that during the winter season attracted wealthy expatriate circles and the Smart set (*Illustrated London News* 1926: 364) including wealthy gay expatriates and socialites (Silver 2001: 105) .

However, a number of recent cultural precedents had re-glossed and updated the contemporary cultural significance of the Riviera for circles of homosexual men and lesbians. Not least were the highly applauded and internationally touring productions that exploited the Côte d'Azur locale and the sailor mythology by the Ballets Russes/ Russian Ballet. As part of its fashionable mixing of Francophile modernism, art, dance and fashion, in 1924 the Diaghilev company had adopted the Mediterranean resort as the setting for its ballet *Le Train Bleu* named after the famous Blue Train, the Calais – Mediterranean express launched in 1922, that carried wealthy French and north European visitors to the Riviera. Produced by Sergei Diaghilev with a scenario by Cocteau, curtain and programs by Pablo Picasso, decors by Henri Laurens, music by Darius Milhaud, choreography by Bronislava Nijinska and with costumes by Coco Chanel, the opérette dansé/ danced operetta had had its première at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris on 24 June 1924 to correspond with the VIII Olympic Games being held in the city at that time. The narrative involves the romantic intrigues and athletic pastimes of a group of wealthy young holiday-makers in the Midi. Incorporating a bathing beauty, a handsome heartthrob boyfriend, a female tennis champion and her boyfriend, and a passionate golfer in British plus fours – making reference to the tennis star Suzanne Lenglen and the golf-loving Prince of Wales- the stylish vacationing party was backed by the corps de ballet playing the roles of other Riviera types including prostitutes, pimps and gigolos (Lodwick 2010:164-65).

Incorporating burlesque comedy and mixing an acrobatic technique with a classical dance vocabulary, Diaghilev's production with its thoroughly modern 'light sophistication' was largely achieved by Milhaud's use of vernacular musical idioms and by Chanel's use of contemporary dress (Davis 2008: 200). Chanel's costumes included two piece bathing suits that were accompanied by fashionable accessories such as imitation pearls, bathing caps, wristwatches and Kodak cameras marking out a relaxed contemporary style that she had pioneered in her collections for sale at her Deauville and Biarritz shops, and available from her recently opened London branch in June 1927(Davis 2008: 198)

Both musical score and costume designs filtered the jaunty popular street styles and relaxed signifiers of Riviera resort stylishness into a holiday-themed opera-dance for a

knowledgeable and upscale metropolitan audience. The production attracted critical acclaim with *Vogue* eagerly applauding the ballet's self-conscious modernity and sportive contemporaneity. Its reviewer gushed that:

In *Le Train bleu* we find ourselves *en plein dix-neuf cent vingt quatre*. To begin with the Picasso curtain: it is terrific. The scene (by Laurens) and the dresses (by Chanel) are perfect. The Russian Ballet is no longer Russian: the cool, quiet, utterly distinguished colours of this ballet are as French as it is possible to be... At the end we feel we have had an experience that is new. (Davis 2008: 197)

Burra and his friends Ker-Seymer, Chappell and Ashton were all devoted Ballets Russes fans (Kavanagh 1996: 82), and they registered the impact that the production made when it travelled to London in the following year; an impression made more forceful for Burra by the fact that he had actually travelled homewards on the Blue Train after visiting Bordighera on the Italian Riviera in 1925. Ashton, who went to its London première recorded that 'I thought it was the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen. The chic, the elegance, the complete evocation of what life was like at that time was staggering to me' (Kavanagh 1996: 63).

An earlier production by the Russian Ballet of *Les Matelots* in 1925 had also exploited the cult of the Mediterranean sailor's exotic appeal and his oft-famed infidelity. With choreography by Léonard Massine, music by George Auric, and the sets, costumes and stage curtains by the Spanish painter Pedro Pruna, it premièred at the Théâtre de la Gaîté-Lyrique in Paris on 17 June 1925. The story of *Les Matelots* revolves around three sailors on leave in Toulon frequenting the portside bars and chatting up the local girls. One of the sailors is French, one is Spanish and one American and the plot is about the French sailor's girlfriend testing his sexual fidelity. Indeed, it was the *matelot* danced by Serge Lifar that attracted particular press attention and critical acclaim marking out the dancer's first real success. Lifar's youth, his good figure and his elegant interpretation of the French sailor distinguished his performance for critics leading Man Ray to take his photograph in 1925 in stage costume and Pruna to paint his portrait in the same year dressed only in revealing trunks and a French navy beret.

Such an appealing sailor performance with its connotations of elegant modernity, male sexuality and bodily spectacle would not have been lost on Ashton, Chappell, Burra and Ker-Seymer all of whom as I have said, were dedicated Russian Ballet fans. Nor, as Lynne Garafola has stressed, did these associations go unrecognised by many members of the London audience when the production travelled there in 1928 (Garafola 1998: 373-74). Its admirers included a large proportion of young homosexual men as contemporary reviewers noted. In July 1928, the *Vogue* critic Herbert Farjeon highlighted the presence of this particular fan base when he wrote that:

The Russian Ballet has returned to London and once again in the long intervals... the corridors of His Majesty's Theatre are crowded with sweet seasonable young men on whose highly presentable souls the soft down of aesthetic pubescence is just beginning to appear. It takes all sorts to make an audience, but it takes only one sort to make it distinguished... so the clientele of the Russian Ballet may now be distinguished by the beautiful burgeoning boys who seem to... regard the dancers

and the décor as a kind of personal adornment. Indeed, they might also be said to wear the Russian Ballet like a carnation in their button holes (Garafola 1998: 373).

By the late 1920s, the corridors of His Majesty's Theatre, like the Palladium Theatre and the Coliseum Theatre circle bars, were well known cruising areas for wealthier middle class ballet fans and their younger homosexual admirers (Houlbrook 2005: 71). Indeed, during Russian Ballet performances in particular, the promenade at Her Majesty's became so crowded with young men in 'strange raiment' that many commentators forewarned that it was an area off limits to respectable women (Garafola 1998: 374).

From the evidence of two photographs taken in Paris: one of André du Dognan with a friend at the annual homosexual Magic City ball in 1930 (Figure 2) and one by Albert Harlingue of the crowd of drinkers in the famous lesbian club *Le Monacle* in Montmartre taken at around the same time (Figure 3), the popularity of sailor wear as fancy dress and as a fashionable way of updating and signalling a more liberated homosexual identity for metropolitan gay women was not limited to the role of travel souvenirs of younger, artistic British circles holidaying on the Mediterranean coast. As fancy dress costume, the French sailor look took its place as exotic military wear alongside the uniforms of the soldier and the legionnaire, and all could be seen at the annual drag balls at Magic City held on Mardi Gras at a huge dance hall on the rue de l'Université in Paris. As Michael D. Sibalís has recorded, the masquerade ball was one of the key features of the Parisian gay calendar and it attracted a wide range of revellers dressed in extravagant drag or fancy dress (Sibalís 1999: 28). There were also sailor themed masquerade balls such as the one held on 23 June 1926 at the Moulin de la Galette in Paris attended by Suzy Solidor and her friends in sailor wear and snapped by Studio D. Wasserman. On the one hand, Du Dognon's photograph can be approached as a memento of this event – a simple souvenir snap shot recording the fun of dressing up and masquerading as sailor boys with a male companion.

Alternatively, as Laura Doan has argued, the snap shot acknowledges the way that photography began to increasingly play a more empowering role in constructing and documenting the presence of homosexual communities and in recording the components of their identities (Doan 2001:167). Although referring to studio portraiture – the profession practiced by Ker-Seymer – as Doan stresses, photography at this period had become 'the preeminent site of self-imaging for the status hungry upper middle classes' (Doan 2001:167). Even such apparently casual snap shots of young, male companions in sailor outfits signal a quest to document how the fluid meanings of fancy dress and masquerade formed part of the modernising of (homo)sexual manners. The positioning of these masquerade balls as a memorable part of artistic and fashionable bohemian society was confirmed when they were photographed by Brassai in 1932 and featured in *Paris de Nuit* (1932) published later as *The Secret Paris of the 30s* (Brassai 1976: np) which, as Allan Ellen Zweig has stressed, visualised the emergence in Paris of the social rituals of a thriving homosexual subculture (Ellen Zweig 1992: 74).

Nor was the empowering role of photography in staking a claim to bohemian identity lost on young fashionable lesbians in Paris. The sailor's military exotic and the sexy connotations of his uniform can also be seen in evidence at the women only bars and clubs that marked out the emergence of a distinctive, vibrant and commercial lesbian subculture in Paris (Geczy and Karaminas 2013: 30-31). Amongst the various couples represented in

Harlingue's photographs of '*Le Monocle*', *Cabaret for Women in Montmartre, Paris* (c.1930) depicting a popular Parisian lesbian cabaret that was credited as one of the earliest women-only bars established by Lulu de Montparnasse in the early 1920s and running until the 1940s, one of the drinkers being kissed by another woman stands out by her sailor outfit (Figure 3). The costume comprises a navy-style top, a pair of bell-bottomed trousers and it is customised by a French sailor's beret with a 'Monocle' band around it. Although it appears that most of the women in the bar wear the popular 1920s female-masculine style of tuxedo and short cropped hair, sometimes sporting a single monocle (Doan 2001: 119) from which the cabaret derived its name, and even though some are dressed in the stylish *garçonne* look of the 1920s or in more conventional hetero-normative feminine fashions of the period (Steele 2013:26), the cross dressed woman at the front in her sailor outfit attests to the appeal that naval wear had to young Parisian lesbians.

As Marjorie Garber has stressed, 'cross dressing is about gender confusion...about the power of women... about the emergence of a gay identity' (Garber 1992: 390). Although Laura Doan has warned of the pitfalls of seeing cross-dressing as a purely homosexual signifier, which it was not since in 1920s Britain and France 'many fashion-conscious women of all sexual persuasions were... donning boyish or mannish attire' (Doan 1998: 667), the appropriation of sailor wear is revealing. It opened up the performance of female-masculinity as part of the Paris-Lesbos metropolitan social scene to much greater visibility and through the appropriation of male military costume, it signalled its transgressive appeal to lesbians as well as to homosexual men.

Nevertheless, as Gen Doy has recorded in her book *Claude Cahun. A Sensual Politics of Photography* (Doy 2007: 24) whilst many modernists including Colette, Claude Cahun and Suzy Solidor were privately photographed in sailor outfits, perhaps making reference to the cross dressing adventures of women pirates as well as capitalising upon its exotic possibilities, it was Solidor, the famous lesbian Parisian *chanteuse* who in her nightclub performances most fully and publically exploited the sailor's hyper-masculine and highly sexualised reputation. As José Medio has stressed, Solidor's cross dressing stage persona keenly exploited the sailor's lusty reputation for different erotic ends and gained her the reputation of being 'the Madonna of the sailors'. He noted that 'her gutsy and masculine voice sang about the chagrins of life and love in the ports and the melancholy longings of lesbian passions' (Medio 2012). Co-opting sailor wear in Parisian women-only bars or on the stage at lesbian cabarets clearly registered it for those aficionados in the know, as a conspicuous form of lesbian self-identification where it was often accompanied by pronounced nautical tattoos (like those that many of Ker-Seymer's friends sported).

In September 1928, Ker-Seymer travelled to the Riviera to experience it at first hand. Accompanied by a group of friends including Burra, Chappell, Ashton and the Polish painter and scenery designer Sophie Fedorovitch amongst others, they stayed in Toulon at the *Hôtel du Port et des Négociants* on the quai Cronstadt where fellow sailor enthusiast Jean Cocteau was also staying with his lover Jean Desbordes. Rarely venturing out during the day, Cocteau and friends spent most of their time smoking opium in his shuttered rooms. Whilst on vacation, Ker-Seymer met up with other pals, notably her childhood friend, the poet and aesthete Brian Howard and his friend Bunny Rogers. In September 1931 Ker-Seymer returned to Toulon once more and she and her friends booked into the cheap quayside hotel. Ker-Seymer dressed in a relaxed sailor-style relaxed on board yachts and

strolled about the quayside (Figure 1). She took photographs of the window displays in the shops selling sailor wear accentuating the glass reflections by adopting the dislocated effects of Bauhaus photographers Germaine Krull and Florence Henri, and framing them in a manner recalling the photographs of Eugène Atget (Stephenson 2013). Accompanied by Burra, she went to Marseilles and tried to photograph the prostitutes sitting outside their brothels plying their trade to sailors in the red light area (Stevenson 2007: 154-55).

Again Cocteau was installed in the Toulon hotel and Ker-Seymer met up with Howard who was by now living in 'the most charming little flat high over the harbour belonging to a woman friend of Cocteau's' with his young and handsome blond German bisexual boyfriend, Toni. (Lanchester 2005: 195). Ker-Seymer recorded that Howard's presence allowed her closer contact with Cocteau and she recalled her first encounter with Toni on this trip: 'I well remember us all sitting at the Café de la Rade in Toulon – Cocteau, Desbordes, [Christian] Bérard, etc. – waiting for this glorious creature to appear the first time' (Lanchester 2005: 198). Such overlapping friendships facilitated Cocteau's request to Ker-Seymer that she photograph him and she went to his room with her Baby Box camera to photograph him smoking opium: 'He was very good and easy. He loved being photographed' she later recalled (Kavanagh 1996: 136).

The allure that Toulon in particular and the French sailor in general had for Cocteau was well known and many credited him with inflaming the sailor's erotic mythology and launching the interest in naval wear. As Edouard Roditi recalled 'Cocteau and his milieu were probably responsible in part for this vogue for the sailor and the red pompoms' (Barbedette and Carassou 1981: 81). Such maritime infatuation was evidenced in Cocteau's in-profile drawings of his young lover from 1926-33, Desbordes, in bed awake and asleep dressed in a sailor's outfit. These drawings were reproduced in his *25 dessins d'un dormeur / Twenty five drawings of a sleeping man* published in 1929. This taste for military masculinity further informed Cocteau's 1928 novel *Le Livre Blanc / The White Book* (1928, 1930) which was set in the port town (Centre Pompidou 2003: 325). The novel first published privately in 1928 was later reprinted and made more widely available in 1930. The cover had an illustration by Cocteau of a young tattooed man in sailor's vest and pompom-ed beret. In the story, the narrator meets an attractive young sailor tattooed with the words 'Pas de chance' / no hope on his chest; a phrase later erased by his admirer and replaced with the inscription 'amour' / love reflecting the homosexual desire that such available military rough trade held. Indeed, while in Toulon in 1931, Cocteau made a series of erotic drawings featuring sailors, often depicted in explicit homosexual acts licking erect and enlarged penises or having anal sex, and such homoerotic associations, alongside his earlier sketches and writings, would contribute to Toulon's reputation as a gay mecca for cruising sailors and having casual homosex. In his *Le Livre Blanc*, Cocteau stressed that:

Men in love with masculine beauty come from all corners of the globe [to Toulon] to admire the sailors, who walk by idly, alone or in groups, respond to glances with a smile and never refuse an offer of love (Cocteau 1928 quoted in Silver 2001: 105)

As one of Britain's leading young photographers using the German 'New Objectivity' style and praised as 'a sharply radical portraitist of a new English avant-garde' (Kavanagh 1996: 135), Ker-Seymer had been trained by the wealthy and well-connected lesbian society heiress, Olivia Wyndham. Wyndham, as Ker-Seymer recalled, keenly exploited her

aristocratic family and female connections in order to get photojournalist commissions from society magazines and to gain access as an 'insider' to photograph any newsworthy socialite parties and after hours events. Wyndham's friends encompassed the smart young socialites and high bohemia of Chelsea and Bloomsbury. Moreover, as already noted, these circles were comprised of many cultured gay and bisexual men including Ashton, Howard, Neil 'Bunnie' Rogers, the artists John Banting, Robert Medley, Cedric Morris and Arthur Lett-Haines, and the dancer and one time lover of Cocteau, Rupert Doone (Stephenson 2013). There were also many bisexual women and lesbians. As Ashton remembered, throughout the 1920s 'I used to be an escort to a host of lesbians' (Kavanagh 1996: 73) with Wyndham being the 'head girl. She was their goddess. They were all mad about her like girls round Sappho on Lesbos' (Kavanagh 1996: 68). These circles also included many British and American media professionals notably the American journalist for *Town & Country* Marty Mann, the editor of British *Vogue* Dorothy Todd and her partner the journalist Madge Garland, and the cross-dressing lesbian oil millionairess Marion ('Joe') Carstairs and her lover Ruth Baldwin.

After her mother found a copy of Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) left lying by the piano at home, Ker-Seymer's sexual preferences were known openly and disapproved of by her parents (Stevenson 2007: 83). Indeed, Hall's novel was at the centre of a highly publicised obscene publications trial following its publication in July that year resulting in it being banned in December 1928. As Virginia Woolf recorded, opinions on the novel and the trial occupied press columns and dinner party conversations since 'At this moment our thoughts centre upon Sapphism...All London they say is agog with this' (Doan 2001: 24-25). Whilst employed as Wyndham's secretary, Ker-Seymer embarked on a brief affair with her. By the late 1920s, she was living on the Kings Road in Chelsea in Wyndham's maisonette where the alcoholic, sexually promiscuous and drug-taking heiress entertained many casual flings and numerous straight and gay lovers (Kavanagh 1996: 84-85). Sailor themed parties also occurred here and Edith Olivier remembered one co-hosted by Wyndham and Stephen Tennant in 1928 where Tennant dressed in 'huge gold earrings as a sailor' (Kavanagh 1996: 69). The flat was the place for encountering an odd mix of the aristocracy, the high society, artists, writers and theatre types who were present during the many wild drunken parties with 'masses of little lesbian tarts and joyboys' (Kavanagh 1996: 86). It was described by Burra as a 'lesbian bohemia' (Stevenson 2007: 84).

After Wyndham departed for the United States to live in Harlem with the famous African-American actress Edna Lloyd-Thomas, Ker-Seymer, aided by Banting, took over Wyndham's Bond Street photographic studio situated above Asprey's the jewellers (Stevenson 2007: 85, 213). As already noted, throughout the 1920s, Ker-Seymer had been mixing in many well connected artistic, theatrical and celebrity high society homosexual and lesbian circles. Through introductions by Wyndham, she had entered into the fashionable world around Dorothy Todd, the influential British *Vogue* editor from 1922-26. Under Todd's editorship British *Vogue*, as Christopher Reed has shown, had transformed itself 'from a women's magazine whose staple elements were high society, the rich and famous, plus high fashion – into a review for the *avant-garde*' (Reed 2006: 41). This undermining of the magazine's previous old fashioned image and stuffy propriety had been achieved by Todd's careful editorial re-direction and by her judiciously bringing to the staff team creative members from London's emerging sexual subcultures to address its younger fashion



conscious and well-informed readership. Reed notes that the articles of *Vogue* columnist and editor of the *New Statesman* Raymond Mortimer acted as 'a guide to an emerging queer literary canon and combined with the photographs and cartoons... [he] made the magazine an exhilarating, sometimes moving, record of a subculture developing around ideals of transgressive erotics and playful androgyny' (Reed 2006: 56).

Moreover, many of the staff team such as Todd and Mortimer were homosexually inclined, Francophile and well connected abroad. Significantly as Thomas Waugh has stressed, these overlapping circles of fashion, journalism, advertising, show business and the performing arts comprised a 'highly interconnected trans-Atlantic web of gay intelligentsia and denizens of high bohemia' around *Vogue* and Cocteau who were keenly alert to the queer high life being lived in the eclectic gay circles of New York, Paris, London and the Riviera (Waugh 1998: 61). When in 1930, Ker-Seymer became romantically involved with and in business with Marty Mann, she also gained access to her partner's connections in the American fashion network that included Condé Nast, thereby securing a contract on commission with *Harper's Bazaar* from 1931 (Stevenson 2007: 87). Thus, Ker-Seymer's photographs featured in two of the most influential international modern magazines for fashion, advertising and celebrity culture in this period in a sector that had virtually invented the category of glamour photography (Waugh 1998: 60).

For Ker-Seymer and her cosmopolitan circle of artistically inclined and fashion conscious lesbian friends, the queer resonance of the sailor-inspired costume was not new and carried with it fond memories of dressing up for the bohemian parties and art student balls they had participated in the early 1920s when at the Chelsea School of Art (Taylor 2007: 27; (Houlbrook 2005: 266-67). This growing lesbian presence featured alongside male bisexual and homosexual circles as part of the wealthy, arty bohemian scene in London's West End gaining a sense, fanned by the popular press, that homosexuality was increasing in the British metropolis. Contributing to such enhanced visibility, at the height of London's 'Bright Young People' season in the mid-late 1920s many fashionable 'High Society' London parties had taken a navy theme and encouraged their invitees to get up or cross dress in sailor attire. As a photograph of Ker-Seymer in sailor dress at the front right from *The Bystander's* report of 'The Bright Young People being Bright' at Olivia Wyndham and Marjorie Firminger's Party, Glebe Place, Chelsea, from 30 October 1929 demonstrates (Figure 4), fashionable young lesbian and bisexual women clearly recognized and exploited its appeal. Such raucous events attracted considerable attention in the London press proving, it was claimed, the younger generation's more lax moral and sexual manners (Taylor 2007: 27). Allanah Harper recalled another case, the Sailor Party at Gerald Reitlinger's London house in the summer of 1927 where many members of the Bloomsbury group including Clive Bell and Lytton Strachey mixed with the circles of Ker-Seymer, Chappell, Howard and Nancy Mitford:

Everyone had to be dressed as a French sailor. I think the only exception was Raymond Mortimer who came as a 'sponge-bag' and Mrs Christabel McLaren who was regal as Rule Britannia. Tallulah Bankhead, dressed in wide English sailor's trousers, was the noisiest person in the room...Lytton Strachey came resplendent as an Admiral. (Lanchester 2005: 158)

Although not in attendance, Burra later described in a gossipy letter what happened as relayed to him by Chappell using the 'outraged' style of the popular tabloid exposé mixed with a decidedly campy tone:

Did B[jillie] tell you of the matelot party empress N [Lucy Norton] took him to? Did I say matelot party, matelots is not what I've heard it called. Oh dear no. My dear I read all about it in the Weekly dispatch everyone attacked everyone else and mounds of young men writhed in heaps in every corner (Stevenson 2007: 81).

As Chappell later remembered, the sailor party had not really attracted the Mayfair 'smart set' with their reserved heterosexuality and sophisticated manners. Rather it was 'Bugger Heaven and no mistake' (Stevenson 2007: 81).

As an article in *Vogue* on 24 June 1931 reveals, the fashion for the sailor collar shirts and fisherman's navy striped tops in haute couture women's wear initially launched by Chanel when she opened her first boutique in Deauville in 1914, had been appropriated a decade later into cheaper, mass produced women's summer fashion (*Vogue* June 1931: 61). The widespread popularity of such fashion styles referenced how Riviera styling had by 1931 entered the mainstream marking out the rapid commercialisation of a French Mediterranean style once less popularly known. Indeed, by the early 1930s, the Côte d'Azur had also undergone a similar process of popularisation and it was no longer the exclusive haunt of the wealthy or the artistic Anglo-American bohemia as it had been in the previous decade.

Burra's 'Mediterranean', a place of cheap cabarets or dance halls and small shops selling navy wear, and a site of sailors cruising around seedy bars or portside streets with brothels, had, as already noted, been increasingly lost as the area's popularity as a tourist destination increased. The possibilities of inter-class sociability and casual homosex with the military had been replaced by 1931 by the demands and commercial opportunities of these newly popular Mediterranean resorts in which visiting the portside bars and being photographed dancing with a French sailor was part of the tourist ritual producing a memorable vacation souvenir. Easily accessible by car, plane or cruise ship as well as train, such pastimes as sitting on the terraces of modern bars; buying the latest fashion trends from fashionable Parisian retail stores or being seen driving down the wide boulevards in the latest model of convertible had replaced its earlier more louche entertainments.

The sporting of French sailor wear as a fashionable sign of unconventionality, whether of a relaxed modern lifestyle, a transgressive sexual proclivity or an exotic taste for military manhood was, as I have suggested, a highly visible and consciously public sign of a modern, often bisexual or homosexual identity at least amongst particular cosmopolitan circles in the 1920s. By the 1930s, sailor wear styling had increasingly lost its subcultural frisson as it had been adopted as maritime chic into mainstream fashion culture. Featured in the pages of international fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* and *Harper's Bazaar*, it had few of its previous associations of artistically inclined, queer fashionability. Conspicuous as part of the latest seasons nautical themed fashion trend, it was readily available to younger middle class women as a commercial style to be bought from British department stores and major clothing retailers.

Nevertheless, sailor wears powerful association with virile masculinity, muscular fit bodies and raunchy sexual adventures had not been fully erased or made culturally redundant by such popularisation. The French sailor's close fitting striped vest that accentuated a muscular v shaped torso, and the hip-hugging bell bottomed trousers with drop fly that highlighted a well-endowed crotch still remained much appreciated in the eyes of many admirers as a (homo)erotically charged signifier. As evidenced in the writing of Jean Genet with its celebration of outcasts and marginal types, the ongoing fascination with sea faring and the sailor's (homo)erotic appeal was maintained after the war. His famed physicality was most fully exploited in the 1982 film adaption by Rainer Werner Fassbender of Genet's 1947 novel *Querelle de Brest* in which Brad Davis wore the French *marin*'s sexually charged costume. And it was such a powerful erotic allure, real or imagined, that persistently inscribed sailor wear with queer possibilities and which made it so appealing as a fashion style to gay sensibilities, then and since.

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